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ABSTRACT

Perceptions about career ladders were studied in 254 pre-service and in-service teachers from two southern states at five different levels of socialization in their professional life: (1) 118 were students taking an entry-level course in teacher education; (2) 44 were senior students before student teaching; (3) 40 were senior students after student teaching; (4) 20 were first-year teachers; and (5) 32 were veteran teachers. A questionnaire was developed from literature on career ladder programs (CLPs). Participants were shown a videotape on CLPs before completing the questionnaire, designed to show changes in perceptions over five levels of professional socialization. As teachers were socialized into the profession, they generally expressed less agreement with the assumptions on which CLPs were based. Nearly half of the veteran teachers did not think that there would be greater incentives for teachers in a CLP. Reservations were expressed about the ability and competence of principals to evaluate effective teaching. However, first-year teachers formed a discrepant group; 80 percent of them considered principals good evaluators. (SLD)

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Perceptions About Career Ladders

Across Levels of Teacher Socialization

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Introduction

The state of Tennessee is currently in its fourth year of the first statewide comprehensive Career Ladder Program. Naturally, many modifications have been made in the program over time. However, basic assumptions on which the original career ladder program was established have not been altered. The ramifications of these assumptions reach far beyond the state of Tennessee. Every year, more states are joining those with career ladder programs in operation.

Teachers may have also changed over the past four years. They appear to be more vocal about the reform agendas that have changed their professional opportunities. It is important that we examine teachers' perceptions of career ladder programs and ways in which their professional lives have been affected by these programs. Those entering the profession for the first time are of particular interest, since they will surely face the impact of career ladder programs.

The purpose of this paper is to present findings from an empirical study of the perceptions about career ladders as pre- and inservice teachers progress through levels of socialization. Not only is it important for career ladder programs to initiate better pay structures, it is critical that these programs provide teachers with new ways to give feedback on the scope of their work. Therefore, one rationale for this study is to obtain feedback and reactions to the basic assumptions for career ladder programs by those who are most impacted by the actual implementation.

A second rationale for the study is the need for an examination of the changes in perceptions as preservice teachers enter the profession. We know that, as teachers enter the profession, their behaviors and attitudes are affected by the job and by those with whom they work. "Socialization

'effects' are greatest when people first join an organization, and the results of socialization can wipe out previous behaviors that are found to be dysfunctional in the new setting" (Hart & Adams, 1986). It is then appropriate to examine a change in perceptions of preservice teachers as they are socialized while progressing through preparation and induction.

Specific objectives for the study included the following questions:

(1) Do teachers agree with the assumptions on which career ladder programs are based?

(2) Do teachers agree with the beliefs about teacher evaluation that are used in implementing career ladder programs?

(3) Do teachers' perceptions about career ladder assumptions and beliefs change as teachers are socialized into the profession?

(4) Are teachers' perceptions about career ladder assumptions and beliefs influenced by participation in career ladder programs?

Method

Subjects

The subjects in the study were 254 preservice and inservice teachers from two southern states. They were in five different levels of socialization in their professional life: 118 were students taking the entry-level course in teacher education, 44 were senior students before student teaching, 40 were senior students after student teaching, 20 were first-year teachers, and 32 were veteran teachers.

Instrument

To meet the objectives of the study, a questionnaire was developed from the current literature on career ladder programs. It contained basic assumptions upon which career ladder programs are developed and beliefs about teacher evaluation used in the implementation of career ladder programs. Statements

were written that reflected the basic assumptions of three states' career ladder program documents. Participants were asked to agree or disagree with each of the assumptions or beliefs.

Procedures

All preservice and inservice teachers in the study were shown a fifteen-minute videotape that contained a brief rationale for career ladder programs and the overview of a model program. Preservice teachers were shown the videotape during their teacher education classes. Inservice teachers were shown the videotape during professional development workshops. At the conclusion of viewing the tape, participants were asked to respond to the 22 item questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Frequencies and percentages were computed on agree or disagree responses. Responses were compared across the five stages of professional socialization using the chi square statistic. Chi square was also used to compare responses by state since one state had a career ladder program in operation and the other state was considering the possibility of developing one. The criterion for significance was set at .05.

Results

Data from 254 respondents were analyzed. Responses were compared according to five levels of professional socialization: level 1 (students taking the entry-level course in the teacher education program), level 2 (senior students before student teaching), level 3 (senior students after student teaching), level 4 (first-year teachers), and level 5 (veteran teachers).

Table 1 shows the percent agreement with the career ladder assumptions by each socialization level. While respondents were generally in agreement with many of the assumptions, there were some exceptions. The assumption that "Only teachers who have been teaching for a number of years should be

able to compete for the top rungs of the career ladder" found little support among respondents. As few as 15% of the first-year teachers agreed with the assumption, and the average percent of agreement among all respondents was only 32%. Another assumption with which there was little agreement was "Teachers identified as 'best' should have additional responsibilities that may require additional time." Percent of agreement with this statement ranged from a low of 10% (among seniors completing student teaching) to a high of 33.4% (among students taking the entry-level course), and there was a statistically significant ($p < .05$) difference among socialization groups on this assumption.

Other assumptions for which percent agreement was significantly different among socialization groups were assumptions #1, #4, and #11. Agreement for the first assumption, "A career ladder program will provide incentive for teachers to become more effective" declined from 100% agreement at level 1 to 53.2% agreement at level 5. There was also a general decline in agreement with assumption #4, "A career ladder program will increase student achievement", from 85.5% agreement at level 1 to 31.3% at level 5 to 15% at level 4. Percent agreement for assumption #11, "Participation in career ladder programs should be required of all teachers", fluctuated from a high of 69.2% at level 1 to a low of 30.7% at level 3.

Table 1

Career Ladder Assumptions

Reported by Socialization Level

Assumptions	Percent Agreement				
	Level 1 (N=118)	Level 2 (N=44)	Level 3 (N=40)	Level 4 (N=20)	Level 5 (N=32)
* 1. A Career Ladder program will provide incentive for teachers to become more effective.	100.00	97.7	80.0	95.0	53.2
2. Teachers, in general, want to be competent professionals.	100.00	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
3. All teachers can improve.	92.3	90.0	97.5	95.0	100.0
* 4. A career Ladder program will increase student achievement.	85.5	79.5	45.0	15.0	31.3
5. A teacher's major task is instruction.	78.6	95.5	72.5	85.0	84.4
6. No limit should be placed on the number of teachers who may attain any performance level.	86.4	95.5	97.5	100.0	100.0
7. The skills needed by an experienced teacher are not different from those needed by a beginning teacher.	48.3	65.9	47.5	60.0	54.8
8. Only teachers who have been teaching for a number of years should be able to compete for the top rungs of the career ladder.	33.9	34.1	35.0	15.0	28.1
* 9. Teachers identified as "best" should have additional responsibilities that may require additional time.	33.4	34.1	10.0	25.0	18.8
10. Creative teaching should be rewarded.	97.4	97.7	95.0	95.0	87.5
*11. Participation in Career Ladder programs should be required of all teachers.	69.2	58.2	30.7	35.0	50.0

* Significant chi square ($p<.05$)

Table 2 reports percent of agreement with beliefs about teacher evaluation in career ladder programs by socialization level. Significantly discrepant responses across the five levels were revealed on two of the beliefs. The belief that "Career ladder programs are able to rank teachers on effective teaching behaviors from lowest to highest" elicited responsed that ranged from 71.4% agreement (at level 1) to 23.3% agreement (at level 5). Responses to "It is possible for an outside observer to assess differences in teacher performance" ranged from 91% agreement (at level 2) to 62.5% agreement (at level 5). The belief for which there was least agreement was "If a teacher scores high on a checklist of teaching competencies, then he or she is an effective teacher" with agreement percentages ranging from a high of 36.4% at level 2 to a low of 18.7% at level 5.

Table 2

Career Ladder Assumptions: Beliefs about Teacher Evaluation

Reported by Socialization Level

Beliefs	Percent Agreement Level 1 (N=118)	Level 2 (N=44)	Level 3 (N=40)	Level 4 (N=20)	Level 5 (N=32)
1. The success of a Career Ladder Program primarily depends on the success of teacher evaluation.	84.3	88.6	77.5	95.0	87.5
* 2. Career Ladder programs are able to rank teachers on effective teaching behaviors from lowest to highest.	71.4	67.4	51.3	50.0	23.3
3. Before teachers are evaluated, they should be provided with a strong professional development program.	82.8	83.1	80.0	100.0	90.6
4. Evaluation instruments must be understood by all teachers & administrators.	97.5	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
5. Evaluation is best conducted by a team of evaluators rather than a single individual.	97.4	100.0	100.0	100.0	87.1
* 6. It is possible fo an outside observer to assess differences in teacher performance.	80.3	91.0	67.5	70.0	62.5
7. Principals are good evaluators of effective teaching.	47.0	63.7	47.3	80.0	40.0
8. Peer teachers are good evaluators of effective teaching.	64.4	75.0	72.5	55.0	77.0
9. For a complete picture of teaching performance to be created, many sources of data are needed.	99.2	100.0	100.0	100.0	93.7
10. Diverse teaching behaviors should not be discouraged by evaluation.	87.8	95.4	92.5	94.7	100.0
11. If a teacher scores high on a checklist of teaching competencies, then he or she is an effective teacher.	33.9	36.4	27.5	35.0	18.7

* Significant chi square ($p<.05$)

Data were collected from preservice teachers in two states, one state in which a career ladder program was in operation (Tennessee), the other state in which a career ladder program was being developed (Alabama). The percentage of agreement was significantly different according to whether the career ladder program was operational or pending on three of the assumptions. Assumption #1, "A career ladder program will provide incentive for teachers to become more effective", elicited almost total agreement (99.2%) from respondents in the state where a program was being developed, but respondents from the state in which a career ladder program was operational indicated less consensus (89.3%). A similar trend existed for the other two assumptions, #4, "A career ladder program will increase student achievement", and #5, "A teacher's major task is instruction", with those from the state where the program was operational exhibiting less agreement with the assumptions than respondents from the state having a pending program. Table 3 presents the responses to the career ladder assumptions by whether the program was operational or pending.

Table 3

Career Ladder Assumptions

Reported by Program Status

Assumptions	Percent Agreement: Operational (N=75)	Percent Agreement: Pending (N=127)
* 1. A Career Ladder program will provide incentive for teachers to become more effective.	89.3	99.2
2. Teachers, in general, want to be competent professionals.	100.0	100.0
3. All teachers can improve.	91.0	93.7
* 4. A teacher's major task is instruction.	73.0	85.8
* 5. A Career Ladder program will increase student achievement.	70.3	79.5
6. No limit should be placed on the number of teachers who may attain any performance level.	89.1	91.4
7. The skills needed by an experienced teacher are not different from those needed by a beginning teacher.	54.7	50.4
8. Only teachers who have been teaching for a number of years should be able to compete for the top rungs of the Career Ladder.	30.6	36.2
9. Teachers identified as "best" should have additional responsibilities that may require additional time.	28.4	29.2
10. Creative teaching should be rewarded.	94.7	98.4
11. Participation in Career Ladder programs should be required of all teachers.	62.7	63.2

* Significant chi square ($p < .05$)

Table 4 presents responses to beliefs about teacher evaluation inherent in career ladder programs by program status. There was discrepancy between responding groups on beliefs #1, #2, #3, and #6, with the group from Alabama indicating a significantly higher percentage of agreement to the four beliefs than the Tennessee group. In general, there was more agreement than disagreement to beliefs about teacher evaluation. Only two of the beliefs provoked more disagreement than agreement. Responses to belief #11, "If a teacher scores high on a checklist of teaching competencies, then he or she is an effective teacher", were quite negative. Only 32.0% and 33.9% of each group respectively indicated agreement with the statement. Belief #7, "Principals are good evaluators of effective teaching" also received a relatively low percent of agreement.

Table 4

Career Ladder Assumptions: Beliefs about Teacher Evaluation

Reported by Program Status

Beliefs	Percent Agreement: Operational (N=75)	Percent Agreement: Pending (N=127)
* 1. The success of a Career Ladder program primarily depends on the success of teacher evaluation.	77.0	88.0
* 2. Career Ladder programs are able to rank teachers on effective teaching behaviors from lowest to highest.	57.0	81.2
* 3. Before teachers are evaluated, they should be provided with a strong professional development program.	68.9	90.5
4. Evaluation instruments must be understood by all teachers and administrators.	98.7	98.4
5. Evaluation is best conducted by a team of evaluators rather than a single individual.	98.7	98.4
* 6. It is possible for an outside observer to assess differences in teacher performance.	71.7	85.0
7. Principals are good evaluators of effective teaching.	60.8	44.8
8. Peer teachers are good evaluators of effective teaching.	62.7	71.6
9. For a complete picture of teaching performance to be created, many sources of data are needed.	100.0	99.2
10. Diverse teaching behaviors should not be discouraged by evaluation.	92.0	89.5
11. If a teacher scores high on a checklist of teaching competencies, then he or she is an effective teacher.	32.0	33.9

* Significant chi square ($p < .05$)

Conclusions

The results of this study indicated that perceptions of preservice and inservice teachers about career ladder programs differ across levels of professional socialization. Generally as teachers are socialized into the profession, they tend to express less agreement with the assumptions on which career ladder programs are based. One reason for this shift may be that as teachers progress through levels of socialization, they are influenced by the experiences they have with other teachers and in schools. When faced with the reality of schools and classrooms, preservice teachers tend to reassess their beliefs about their chosen profession. This study indicates that socialization affects philosophical agreement with career ladder assumptions.

Students in introductory-level education courses are probably most similar to the general public in understanding, opinions, and idealism about career ladder programs. But these opinions change dramatically over time and experience. For example, assumption #1 (A career ladder program will provide incentive for teachers to become more effective) was agreed with by 100% of students in level 1 and agreed with by only 53% of the veteran teachers. Students, as well as the general public, would like to believe that there will be greater incentives for teachers in a career ladder program. However, nearly half of the veteran teachers surveyed did not share this opinion. In addition, agreement with assumption #1 diminished in the state where the career ladder program was operational, again reflecting a less idealistic view of such programs.

Unlike the general public, both pre- and inservice teachers agree that teachers generally want to be competent professionals. 100% of those surveyed agreed with this assumption. Perhaps, those chosing to major in education enter coursework with this conviction. Socialization into the profession does not appear to alter it.

The assumption receiving the least amount of agreement dealt with "best" teachers being assigned additional responsibilities. To require more work as a reward for being evaluated highly is apparently regarded as contradictory. However, new programs continue to implement this type of "reward" for excellent teaching.

Another assumption that was negatively regarded required longevity in the profession as prerequisite for movement through career ladder programs. A low of 15% of new teachers agreed with this assumption, as might be expected. However, only 28% of veteran teachers felt that longevity qualified one to compete for the top rungs of a career ladder.

Veteran teachers who have experienced evaluation showed marked skepticism that career ladder programs are able to rank teachers from lowest to highest. Across levels of socialization there was an indication that checklists of teaching competencies were of little use when identifying effective teaching, with veteran teachers being the least confident in these measures. Perhaps this reservation is further substantiated by a high percent of agreement across levels that diverse teaching behaviors should not be discouraged by evaluation.

Generally, reservation was expressed about the ability and competence of principals to evaluate effective teaching. Even preservice teachers shared those reservations. The discrepant group in this trend was first-year teachers, 80% of whom expressed agreement that principals are good evaluators of effective teaching.

In summary, enthusiam for many of the assumptions that underlie career ladder programs appears to diminish with experience in the classroom and experience in the programs. Veteran teachers as well as veterans of career ladder programs expressed less agreement with these basic assumptions.

Findings of this study can contribute to a better understanding of the effects of career ladder programs on veteran and future teachers.

References

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